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Will Redmoon's Great Chicago Fire Festival survive its own plan?

The inaugural spectacle, set for October 4, is a symbolic communal exorcism.

By Deanna Isaacs

@deannaisaacs



A model of one of three Victorian "houses" to be torched as part of the festivities

ALEX FRIEDLAND

Last week Redmoon Theater rolled up the big metal door of its Pilsen spectacle factory for an informal preview of the largest project in its 24-year history, the [inaugural Great Chicago Fire Festival](#), set to ignite October 4.

What the hundred or so visitors saw there is a work in progress—devices and props being hand-built for the fire-on-water show that Redmoon (and Mayor Rahm Emanuel) intends to be an iconic annual event. Attendees also got a glimpse of how the concept has evolved since the fest was first announced by the city a year and a half ago, touted as an event that will attract global attention and highlight "our cultural assets and heritage."

It's a relief to report that the original plan has mostly been thrown overboard.

That plan called for Chicagoans to build flammable effigies of the thing that's worst about their neighborhoods—the affliction they most want to get rid of. Redmoon would then affix those effigies to floats that would make their way from boathouses on the North and South Branches of the Chicago River to the Main Stem, where they would be ceremonially torched in a spectacular bonfire, images of which would immediately circle the globe.

So we won't after all be seeing giant representations of guns, drugs, gangs, homelessness, unemployment, bad schools, racism, segregation, and poverty sailing through Chicago and onto the print and digital pages of the international press.

The current plan has dumped both the river parade and the neighborhood-built effigies. What we'll have instead is a water show centered on three floating platforms anchored on the river downtown, between the State Street and Columbus Drive Bridges.

Each platform will carry a structure that looks like a big Victorian house—ostensibly the kind of houses that were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1871. At the climax of an 80-minute show that'll include a bevy of flaming buoys and performances by Redmoon and the Chicago Children's Choir, those "houses" will be torched, burning away to reveal fireproof symbolic sculptures inside.

Redmoon wants those sculptures to be a surprise, but there's likely to be a glassy star for the city flag, a tribute to first responders, and a representation of the modern architecture that rose from the city's ashes. A steampunk-style boat will deliver the fire that ignites the houses, and a fireworks display, with music, will finish things off. "Tens of thousands" of people are expected to watch from the newly expanded Chicago Riverwalk.

You might remember that Venetian Night, which regularly drew more than 500,000 viewers to the lakefront, was dumped by Mayor Daley five years ago to save \$300,000. (It's back this year, but at Navy Pier.) This project, whose budget has grown from \$1 million to \$2 million since it was announced, will [get \\$350,000 from the city and the rest from sponsors and donors](#).

There'll be a preshow bazaar offering crafts and food from 30 kiosks set up for Redmoon's neighborhood partners. The river spectacle is being presented as the culmination of a series of weekend visits to 15 Chicago neighborhoods, from Albany Park to Woodlawn, that have included cookouts and a traveling photo booth (designed with help from [Sandro Miller](#)) in which about 7,000 people have posed. Hundreds of the resulting photos will line Wacker Drive for the event, and will be flashed from screens on 75 kayaks in the show's final moments.

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After nine months of preparation, what could be seen last week in Redmoon's 57,000-square-foot home were a clutch of propane "fire buoys"; cauldrons (built by kids from [After School Matters](#)) that'll no doubt be impressive hanging from the bridges but right now resemble hardware-store fire pits; unassembled parts for miniature pseudosteambots; a closet-size wooden kiosk; and three big, jungle-gym-like structures of metal tubing that'll be the bones of those sacrificial Victorian houses.

The photo booth was also on display, inviting visitors to pop in for a portrait. And there, the dicey part of the original festival concept is still in play. To get a photo taken, you have to complete a statement written on a paddle-size flame-shaped chalkboard. The choices are "I overcome," on one side, or "I celebrate," on the other. Sample photos on banners and on the [festival website](#) show "ordinary" Chicagoans looking straight into the camera and holding signs that proclaim "I overcome" the likes of violence, bipolar disorder, and cancer.

So Chicago is largely presented as a city of victims—its hapless residents defined by the personal and societal evils they've managed to survive. The Fire Festival has a tagline that says it celebrates "Chicago's stories of grit and renewal," but there's something smarmy about going into the city's neighborhoods—including some of its most challenged—and thinking you're getting people's stories by asking them to complete a short sentence about what they've had to overcome.

Redmoon producing artistic director Frank Maugeri said that 100 of these photos will end up in a book by Miller. Will that be a coffee-table book?

This take on the city, as a hub of mass recovery, isn't likely to inspire any travel plans by the international set. It seems, in fact, to be at odds with Emanuel's goal of building an image of a Chicago powerful and glamorous enough to be a global destination. And the Fire Festival doesn't look to be the drunken orgy that fuels Mardi Gras in New Orleans, either. What Redmoon is producing is something much more sober: a symbolic communal exorcism.

According to Maugeri, who says the event is all about "empowering" people, attendees at the spectacle will be able to write letters identifying something they want to get rid of. These missives will be collected by "postmen" who'll row out and deliver them to the sacrificial houses. When the houses burn, the letters will also go up in flames.

That'll be about as effective as exorcisms ever are.